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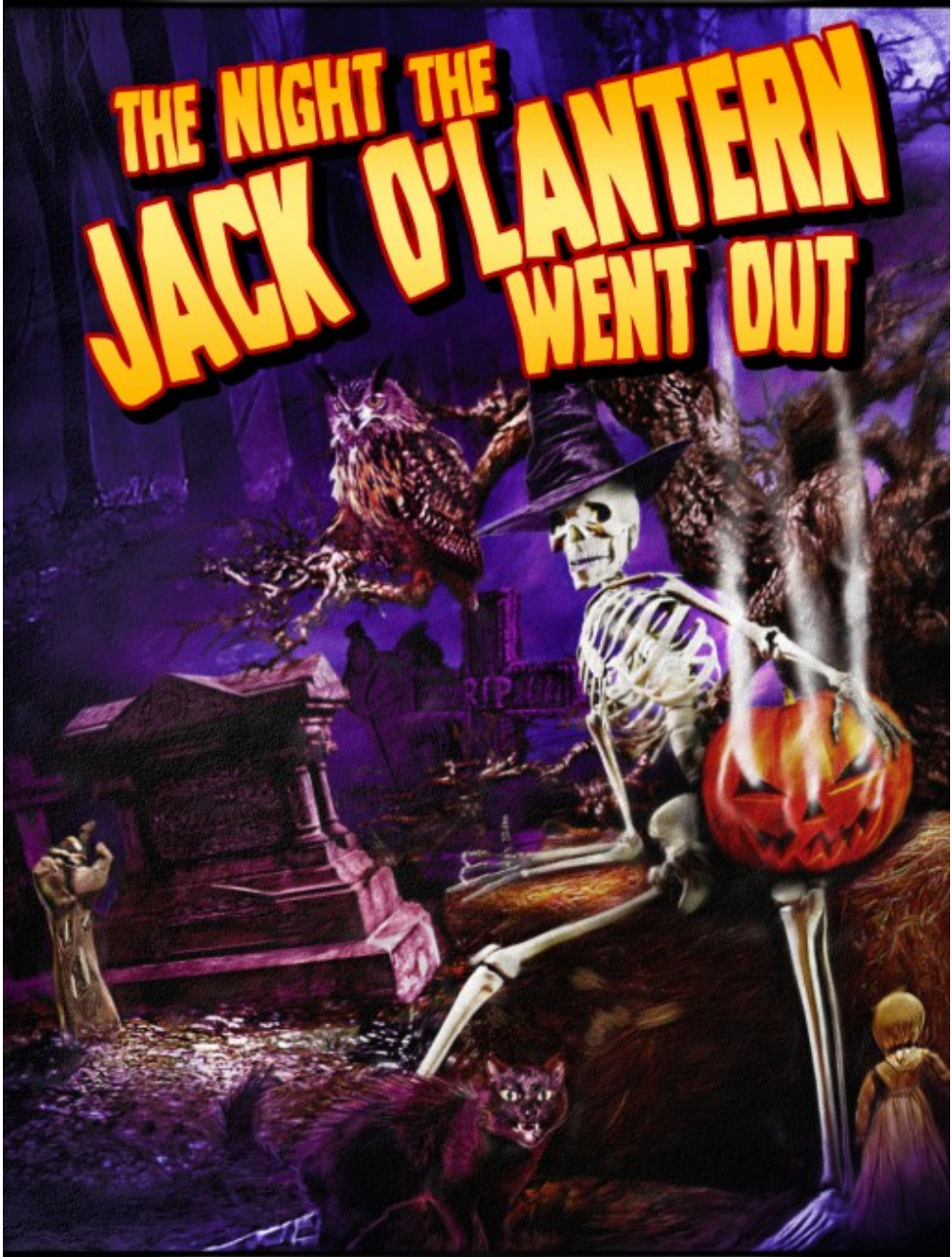

BY ALEXANDER S. BROWN

THE NIGHT THE JACK O'LANTERN WENT OUT

By Alexander S. Brown

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Robert had an indefinite love for Halloween. So much, that despite the joys of Christmas, he favored the chills of Samhain more. There were multiple reasons for this adoration. Each year, he would stay up watching horror movies until the television network turned to white noise. Then there were the bags of candy that would last until the New Year. Most of all, this was the one night of the year he could roam the streets as something other than himself.

He was a thirteen year old trickster who used Halloween as another excuse to prank people. The Devil costume he wore this particular Halloween was suitable. From the plastic, manufactured Devil mask to the flame painted poncho, he fit the part of the typical 1950's trick or treater.

His first costume choice had been a vampire, not the Devil. A story, he heard in school, changed his mind to this damnable creature.

Like always, he was grateful he waited until Halloween Day to buy a costume. Waiting until last minute had become a personal custom. School would end, he would ride his bicycle to Wentworth's Drug Store down the street, buy a costume and soda with the allowance he accumulated, come home, carve a pumpkin, and then begin trick or treating.

Tonight, he rode his bike through the shadows of the neighborhood, thinking of the tale he heard earlier. This newly learned story was the inspiration for the tricks he would pull tonight. Unlike the previous year, he didn't need toilet paper to roll trees, soap for windows, or eggs for throwing. All he needed was his costume and a carved gourd.

In a metal wire basket positioned between the handlebars of his bicycle, a jack o' lantern sat next to a sack of candy. The candle within the gourd still flickered and illuminated the dark, empty streets. During carving, he had created jagged, triangular eyes and a matching nose. The mouth was also cut jagged, granting his creation fangs. The gourd looked chilling in the lonesome night.

He wondered how many kids he scared with this imagery. A Devil flying down the street, on a bicycle at full speed with a lit jack o' lantern cutting through the night. This was enough to make any kid wet his or her pants, or at least give them nightmares.

He mused, admiring the cunning Jack who cheated the Devil. Even when the teacher spoke of the story, he smiled, thinking of the classmates he would terrorize. As always, Robert's boastful mentality kicked in, causing him to consider he was just as tricky as the legendary character. Although most kids found this story chilling, he admired Jack.

Mrs. Ellderidge had told the story of Jack and the Devil in her witch's costume. Her body, lacking poise and elegance, slumped against her desk. Her near retirement appearance added to the black clad costume and pointed hat she wore. Even without makeup, she was a crone. Her skin was pale white with liver spots and her frizzed hair was gray. The costume she wore clung

tighter than intended to her body, revealing her pot belly and saggy breasts. She portrayed the image of a woman who never was attractive.

"Jack was a trickster," she explained, "and a crook. Throughout a life of conning good people, he was one day confronted by the Devil, who decided to collect his soul. With Jack being the manipulator he was, he told the Devil, 'If you can climb the tallest tree in this county, then you can have my soul.' The Devil laughed and asked to be taken to this tree. Sure enough, the Devil climbed to the top but once he got up there, he was too scared to come down. The Devil asked for Jack's help, which he refused. Jack explained once the Devil was on ground again, he would sure enough take him to Hell for proving him a coward."

At this point, Robert's admiration for Jack increased. Jack had been a smart man. He shouldn't be to blame because of everyone else's stupidity.

"Jack made another deal with the Devil. The deal was if he helped the Devil down from the tree, he would never go to Hell. The Devil agreed and Jack helped him. Now that Jack gained total immunity, he continued living life without limits or regrets. But when he died and went to Heaven, he was not allowed to enter because of his bad deeds. St. Peter sent him to the gates of Hell where he was also refused entrance. With no other option, Jack was condemned to wander purgatory… Now, during his years of wandering, he determined he would rather go to Hell instead of being stuck in purgatory. He returned to the gates of Hell and made a final deal with the Devil. The deal was Jack would bring the Devil one human soul if he was allowed into Hell. The Devil agreed and explained every Halloween Jack would be allowed to roam Earth in search of a soul. On this night, the Devil provided him with a carved gourd lit by the embers of Hell. This would allow Jack to see his way through the night."

Of all of the lessons Mrs. Ellderidge taught, this one held Robert's attention. The way she told the story made him feel connected with Jack, like he would do what Jack did if he was in his shoes. In a sense, he felt like a kindred spirit to the misunderstood character.

She continued, "So class, this is why it's tradition we leave jack o' lanterns lit overnight on Halloween. When Jack is allowed to search for a human soul, the jack o' lanterns we carry or keep at our doorstep confuse him. It makes him think we are lost souls, who are also on the prowl. So tonight, as long as your jack o' lantern is lit, you are safe."

Although some of the kids gobbled this lesson up as truth, Robert saw how gullible they were and decided to take advantage of their fear.

Now that the streets were empty and most children were ready for bed or settling in to watch horror movies, it was time for the pranks to begin. He chuckled, thinking of the screams of his victims.

He rounded the bend to the first house belonging to his classmate, Mary Weisel. She was one of the few students who seemed scared by the story. While the teacher spoke, Mary clammed up. Her eyes grew wide, her hands

clutched her desk seat, and she bit into her bottom lip. If he had been sitting behind her, he would have grabbed her in the middle of storytelling. She would have screamed and the class would have laughed. The only downfall is he would have received detention and a spanking from his parents. In the long run, the scare would have been worth it.

When arriving at her one story brick home he parked his bike near the street curve under an old Sycamore tree. He snickered when he saw the jack o' lantern on the top step was still lit. She had been scared by the story instead of embracing it.

This is gonna be fun, he thought, imagining the bloodcurdling scream she would release. Hopefully, her cry would spook the entire house.

Quicker than a child running downstairs on Christmas morning, he positioned the kickstand, grabbed his jack o' lantern, and snuck to the living room window. Before raising the jack o' lantern up, he looked into the house where a television resonated in a dark room.

Sitting on the couch and loveseat were all seven of Mary's siblings. Their ages ranged from first grade to ninth grade. All siblings appeared different in height and weight, yet they all shared basic genetics. Their freckled skin was milky white and they all had reddish orange hair.

They were gathered around, watching television and snacking on Halloween candy. Still, they were dressed to character. Some wore their masks pulled back to their foreheads and others sat with their masks nearby on the rug. Others with partial masks, such as the youngest brother who was dressed as the Lone Ranger, remained in full costume.

Discarded candy wrappers littered the wooden floor as glass soda bottles, either empty or half empty, sat on coasters or were held. He snickered, imagining the soda bottles being spilt and everyone scattering as he scared them.

Robert flicked the window then moved aside, certain this action gained their attention. One of the younger girls, perhaps Mary, gasped, "What was that!?!"

"It's a tree branch," answered one of the older brothers, sounding annoyed she interrupted the movie.

Robert waited, grinning. He peeked back inside and saw everyone had returned their attention to the television. After flicking the window a second time, he ducked.

"There it was again," gasped the girl, who he definitely recognized as Mary.

"It's nothing," the same older brother reassured, his annoyance worsened.

"You did leave the jack o' lantern lit, didn't you?" She panicked.

"I did," he answered. His voice indicated she should shut up and watch the movie.

"But-"she began to argue.

"Shhhh," the older brother demanded, "the movie is on."

Robert stood from his squatting position and looked back inside. The movie was *The Old Dark House.* He waited, then flicked against the glass a third time. Before being seen, he ducked.

"There it is again," Mary whined, hoping a sibling would investigate. With the possibility of someone else coming to the window beside Mary, he felt a wave of disappointment overcome him. Of course, if someone else came to the window, he could still scare them, yet the impact wouldn't be as great.

"It's nothing," an older sister said. "If you go look out the window, you'll see its nothing!"

There was silence like she was debating the suggestion.

"Yeah, go look," one of the younger brothers chimed.

She ignored them until one of the girls called her a chicken.

"Am not," Mary protested.

Someone made clucking noises. Another sibling joined the teasing and another and another. Several voices began in sing songy fashion, "Mary is a chicken! Mary is a chicken!"

The chant was like music to Robert's ears.

"Am not!"

"If you're not chicken, go look out the window," teased the older sister that had spoken a moment ago.

"Fine," Mary blurted, determined to prove she was brave.

This is too easy, Robert considered.

Footsteps crossed the floor followed by a pause. He looked up to the window. Mary's hands pressed against the glass, cupping around her eyes to block out all possible light. Inching her face closer to the window, she strained and focused outward.

Just when she was ready to turn away, Robert stood, holding up the jack o' lantern so she was faced with its wicked grin. She screamed and ran toward her siblings, then hid behind the couch. At first, her family looked confused. Then two of the younger kids, one dressed as the Lone Ranger and the other dressed as a witch, saw him. They screamed, causing the older kids to jump. Without wasting any more time, Robert ran, laughing the entire way to his bike.

Before anyone could exit the home, he peddled away. Finally looking over his shoulder, he saw he had cleared a great distance from Mary's home. He slowed, feeling he was too far away for identification.

The trick had worked better than he'd imagined. Robert laughed until crying, remembering Mary's face and the way she screamed. He tried to mimic her scream and although he couldn't do it identically, the sound was close enough to encourage his laughter.

Ahead was a bend in the road. Following that was a steep hill that would lead to Timmy's house. This would be another residence he could rile up. Timmy was the class bully, one who would steal lunch money, trip others, pull pranks, and was the cause for most playground battles.

Although Robert was on Timmy's bully list, the two were considered competitors who fed off of one another. One would pull a prank and the other would attempt to outdo the prankster. Neither he nor Timmy ever partook in a fistfight. They were mature enough to swallow their pride and admit to one another, “That was a good one.”

Robert doubted Timmy would get as panicked as Mary did. Yet, the prank would still be worth seeing Timmy's fat ass waddle away, yelling for his mommy. After this prank, Robert would regain his spot on the throne for lead prankster. Come the following school day, he would boast about how he terrorized Mary and Timmy. In return, Mary would slap him and Timmy would punch his shoulder and say, “Good one.”

Robert came to the curve leading downhill and slowed. Yet, when descending, he discovered his speed should have decreased more before making the decline. Halfway downhill, panic flooded. His toes curled in his chucks and sweat began building between his face and mask. Even with his palms squeezing the handle brakes, there wasn't much luck of decreasing to a favorable speed.

His arms wobbled, causing his steering to become disoriented. Before regaining balance, the bicycle overpowered his intentions. While knowing he was going to crash, there was nothing he could do to prevent this accident.

Shifting his weight to the right at the hill’s base, Robert fell into a muddy patch where during even the calmest of rain, water would gather and sit for days, collecting bugs and trash. Even during the summer, he doubted if the spot ever dried. With a heavy thud he landed in the cesspool that smelled more of sewage instead of soil.

When he wrecked, he fell onto his side with the bike on top of him. Once the bike was pushed off, he sat in the mud. Although anyone else would jump to their feet, he sat in the cold filth sulking. A tantrum surfaced. He grabbed the plastic Devil mask and cursed, "Damnit!" He ripped the disguise from his face, breaking the elastic string that held it in place.

Robert threw his Devil mask aside and looked to his scattered bag of candy. He cursed further. If his parents heard this slew of obscenities, a bar of soap would enter his mouth. The tantrum ended once he noticed the jack o’ lantern was smashed to smithereens. Its orange meaty inner shell was speckled with red wax from the extinguished candle and mud from the foul soil.

When Robert stood, he found the majority of the mud was protected by the inferno printed poncho. Yet his pants weren’t as lucky as the water and mud seeped through the fabric, making him feel both gritty and cold. He could tell he was going to suffer a chafing from the wet pants rubbing between his legs.

Well, tonight's over, he lamented.

He turned to retrieve his bike and heard something rustle in the woods beside him. Looking over his shoulder, he expected to see some type of

creature that he and his father would hunt, but saw nothing. For seconds, he waited and watched for the culprit to show itself. When nothing appeared, he assumed the sound was caused by the wind or his imagination.

Robert reached to his muddied bike and lifted it from the slop. He walked back to the paved road with intentions of climbing the hill. Once reaching the top, he would ride home. The journey would take him no more than fifteen minutes, just enough time for his inner thighs to get chafed.

As he stepped onto the road, a twig snapped behind him. He turned and saw a jack o' lantern in the distance, held at what could be seven to eight feet from the ground. The jolting image caused him to grip his bicycle handles. He was expecting to see a coon, a deer, or at worst a wild hog, but not this.

In the shadows, the jack o' lantern's mincing, crooked grin, triangular nose, and jagged pyramid eyes glared. Although the face wasn't as grim as the one Robert had created, the scene was frightening. Maybe this was a prank – maybe it was Timmy. Even with this rationalization, something felt unnatural and mysterious. Robert couldn't help but think perhaps this wasn't Timmy at all, but something paranormal. Still, he asked, "Timmy, is that you?"

The figure didn't speak. Robert's brain screamed, *Of course it's not Timmy! Timmy is shorter than you! This person is the height of a basketball player!*

The towering figure stepped forward. Without wasting another second, instinct caused Robert to run. He attempted climbing the hill while pushing the bicycle. When he wasn't gaining the expected velocity, he looked down and saw the bicycle's front tire was flat. Maybe he ran over a nail while going downhill.

Hoping to see the stranger had been a figment of his imagination, Robert looked over his shoulder. To his horror, the ghoul was real and it had progressed to the spot of Robert's wreckage.

The specter stood there, watching him. Beneath the moonlight, the haunt gained a greater visibility. He was dressed in colonial attire suitable for a poor man. His skin was gray with the hues of purple, yellow, and icy blue. The face this villain displayed was sunken and slick. Most horrifying was how his skin loosely hung to its skeleton. Held in his oversized, bony hands was the jack o' lantern. Even though this gourd was held at chest level, it appeared to be six feet from the ground. Stricken with horror, Robert understood. This was Jack.

Robert slung his bicycle down and fled uphill with a greater speed than most children. When reaching the hilltop, he turned and saw he was just out of Jack's reach. This legendary figure had tucked the jack o' lantern under his left arm. His right arm was outstretched, intending to seize Robert by his poncho. Jack moaned, exposing rotted teeth and a discolored tongue. His eyes were wide, exposing nearly the entire bulging eyeball.

Robert began screaming as he ran down the street. Jack maintained a speed not expected for a dead man. No matter how great Robert cried, no one stepped onto their porch or lawn to investigate. The neighborhood figured the

commotion was probably another trick from a candy-neglected kid.

Although instinct suggested he knock on a door for help, Robert hadn't gained enough distance between himself and Jack to gain that ability. Until he did, he would continue running without looking back.

After clearing a few blocks, Robert's legs began aching, and a stabbing pain pierced his side. Not long after, his lungs grew sore from the cold, dry air. Tears from fear and pain flew back, trailing to his ears as he fled.

Before making the end of this street, Robert's speed slowed. His breathing grew wheezy like an asthmatic. Before getting back up to speed, a cold hand gripped his right arm. He squealed in pain as Jack's long fingernails dug into the fat of his bicep.

Robert continued trying to run but Jack's grip refused escape. The boy turned and looked into the monster's milk white eyes. Now that he met Jack, Robert no longer felt like they were kindred spirits.

If he could take back what he wished, he would but that would be useless. Robert had been in the wrong place at the wrong time without a lit jack o' lantern.

"Let me go!" Robert shouted, "HELP, SOMEBODY HELP!"

"No one can save you," Jack gurgled from rotting vocal chords. "I have waited years to bring the Devil a soul and now I've got one."

Jack threw his jack o' lantern down, where it shattered at their feet. There was no need to carry the gourd any longer. Before Robert could struggle free, Jack gripped the boy with his second hand. Robert jerked and yanked for freedom. He pulled at the clutched hands and kicked at Jack's shins. Every blow and movement was ineffective.

Robert began trying to concoct a plan as cunning as the one Jack used to trick the Devil.

"Wait!" Robert tried to reason.

Jack paused in curiosity. "I know what you're doing, boy and it can't be done. My mind won't change."

"No, wait! You have to listen to this," Robert shouted, not knowing what to say.

"Time to go," Jack gurgled. "Don't forget who you're trying to fool."

To Robert's horror, Jack didn't care what was being offered. Jack had wandered this world too many Halloweens to care. His primary focus now was to drag Robert to Hell.

Before the boy could struggle or plead any further, the two faded into the night like a dying fog. After they vanished, nothing more than a howling wind tunneled down the empty street.

Come morning, police and search crews hunted the town for the missing boy. All that was found of Robert was his overturned bicycle, his spilt candy, the Devil mask, and finally the smashed jack o' lantern.

End

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by Alexander S. Brown

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Edited by Tommy Hancock
Editor in Chief, Pro Se Productions-Tommy Hancock
Submissions Editor-Barry Reese
Director of Corporate Operations-Morgan Minor
Publisher & Pro Se Productions, LLC-Chief Executive Officer-Fuller Bumpers

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Pro Se Productions, LLC
133 1/2 Broad Street
Batesville, AR, 72501
870-834-4022
proseproductions@earthlink.net
http://www.prose-press.com